

The Company FSO

A Learning Process

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The company fire support officer (FSO) is a key member of the combined arms team. He brings to the company his extensive knowledge of the principles, capabilities, and organization of fire support, which he must share with the unit's leadership. They, in turn, must familiarize him with the equipment, capabilities, and missions of the supported unit. The success of their relationship rests upon this learning process, and once it is complete, the result is a confident, combat ready force that can effectively plan for and execute a fire support plan to complement the scheme of maneuver.

The synchronization of fires as part of a maneuver plan is the responsibility of both the fire support officer (FSO) and the combined arms commander. In many units, however, the company FSO is rarely seen while the company is in garrison. The purpose of this article is to highlight the unique training, missions, and qualifications of the FSO.

When the company moves out for a major deployment or a rotation to one of the combat training centers, the FSO and half a dozen soldiers are part of the combined arms force. The FSO must accompany the commander to the battalion operations order (OPORD) brief and take notes to help him prepare for the company level OPORD in a few hours. But he must also transmit information that is more detailed than that in the battalion FSO's brief.

If the company FSO is integrated into company training and becomes as well-versed in tactics as the other lieutenants in the company, he will be able to contribute as much firepower as a fourth

platoon leader could, and probably more. Field artillery observers at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) estimate that a good company FSO is responsible for 80 percent of a light infantry company's firepower during a rotation.

The Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, has a dual focus in the Field Artillery Basic Course—turning second lieutenants into both FSOs and battery fire direction officers. In the 16-hour course, 124 hours are devoted to observed fire procedures. (Most of the procedures learned during this phase of training come from Field Manual 6-30, *Observed Fire Procedures*.)

Once assigned to a battalion, a lieutenant normally serves as either platoon fire direction officer, platoon leader, ammunition officer, or company FSO. Until recently, though, most lieutenants in a direct support artillery battalion were initially assigned as company FSOs. The Field Artillery community at large realized that FSOs assigned to maneuver companies did not have the routine artillery knowledge they needed to be fully successful.

Presently, many Artillery lieutenants complete duty with a firing battery or their battalion before becoming company FSOs. But there are more TOE (tables of organization and equipment) positions for company FSOs than for platoon fire direction officers or platoon leaders. While most Field Artillery commanders would probably like to slot a lieutenant in a battalion or firing battery job, the number of jobs available makes it unlikely that every lieutenant can be assigned to a battery.

The primary trainer for a company level FSO is the battalion FSO. All FSOs are assigned to the headquarters battery of the direct support battalion. The company FSO trains on the use of the digital message device (DMD), the fire support team (FIST) DMD, and other technical aspects of fire support.

While the battalion FSO can train the company FSO in the use of fire support, the maneuver company commander also shares this training responsibility. Like other new officers assigned to an infantry company, the company FSO and the fire support team need instruction on company and battalion standing operating procedures (SOPs) and small unit tactics.

One of the first things a company commander must understand is that he and the company FSO do not speak the same tactical language in discussing the desired effects of fire support. To an infantry commander, to *destroy* an enemy element means to completely degrade the unit's ability to wield combat power. To his FSO it means using high explosive and improved conventional munitions to cause 30 percent casualties or material damage. Obviously, problems could arise from unfamiliar tactical language. FM 6-20-20, *Fire support at Battalion Task Force and Below*, offers explanations and common definitions that will help overcome these problems.

The company FSO's integration into routine company activities helps him form a functional relationship with the rest of the company. The Artillery lieutenant, like the Infantry lieutenants, is eager to establish a rapport with the

commander and to become part of the company team. Including the FSO in terrain walks, officer professional development sessions, and routine field training can build the company team faster and overcome the tactical language barrier.

Once the company FSO is integrated into the company planning process, he begins to understand the nuances of small-unit tactics. At the battalion OPORD, when the FSO hears such phrases as *movement to contact* and *deliberate attack*, he should think of specific fire support procedures to support the company commander's portion of the operation. Although the FSO understands the nature of the operation, he must discuss specific guidance with the commander so that fire support can be integrated to accomplish the overall intent for the mission.

Company commanders have historically done a poor job of communicating this guidance and intent to their FSOs. The commander's intent should include the following:

- What are the priority targets?
- When does priority of fire support shift within the company?
- How are FIST vehicles used in the company sector?
- Who controls the mortars?
- How much ammunition is available for the mortars?
- Has the company been allotted any final protective fires (FPFs)?
- What restrictive fire support coordinating measures are in effect?
- What events designate firing illumination or smoke?
- Where are obstacles sited in the company sector?
- Where are friendly forces positioned?
- What fire support assets are readily available to the company?

After receiving the commander's guidance and his fire support tasks, the FSO begins company fire support planning. He gives the commander a fire support estimate for each course of action that is wargamed. Additionally, the FSO should know how many minutes of smoke and illumination are available to the commander.

While the platoon leaders make sector sketches, the FSO makes a sketch of the surrounding terrain. The sketch includes prominent terrain features, along with distances and azimuths to them. Terrain sketches help in planning fires and make the execution of on-call targets easier for the commander. The company FSO refines target locations for the battalion FSO and submits a target list to him, if bottom-up fire planning is authorized. (Bottom-up fire planning allows company FSOs to contribute to the battalion fire plan by submitting targets to the battalion FSO. In top-down fire planning, the type normally used, targets developed during the IPB process at brigade are handed down to lower-level FSOs.)

CRITICAL ITEMS

The company FSO assists the company commander in preparing the company OPORD by producing three critical items: *the fires paragraph*, *the fire support plan*, and *the fire support execution matrix*.

The Fires Paragraph. His first critical contribution to the company OPORD is the fires paragraph, paragraph 3(b) of the OPORD, which contains fire support tasks and the purpose for shaping the battle. The commander must specify the purpose and intent of fire support as it applies to the commander's intent for the operation at both brigade and battalion levels.

The second item in the fires paragraph is the priority of fires within the company. The commander must specify the priority so the company FSO can coordinate the resources to weight the main effort. Schedule of fires, the third element of the fires paragraph, refers to *preparatory fires*, *counterfire*, *groups*, and *series* that either use most of the fire support means or divert some of the fire support means available to the commander. A good example of this is a division artillery preparation fired 15 minutes before a unit crosses the line of departure. These preparations may divert direct support battalion guns that would otherwise fire on priority targets

for the maneuver commander. During the movement of the direct support battalion, field artillery assets will not be available to the commander. The commander's mortars are his own most responsive fire support asset. When covering the schedule of fires, a good FSO should mention the consequences of losing field artillery assets and how the commander can overcome these shortcomings by using his mortars.

The last item in the fires paragraph consists of special instructions for the use of illumination, smoke, or Copperhead guided munitions against high payoff targets.

The Fire Support Plan. The second critical contribution the company FSO makes is the fire support plan, which is normally in the *tasks to combat support units* portion of the execution paragraph. The company FSO relays information concerning air assets, chemical munitions, naval gunfire, and other indirect fire assets.

The company FSO is responsible for writing the field artillery plan, which should be at least three paragraphs. (After the first OPORD, however, the FSO generates fragmentary orders (FRAGOs) to the plan and the number of paragraphs may differ from the OPORD to the FRAGOs.) First, a general paragraph elaborates on the purpose and nature of fires not covered in the fires paragraph of the concept of the operation portion of paragraph 3a(2). The second paragraph is the order of combat, which lists the artillery battalions that directly support the maneuver brigade, battalions with general support reinforcing missions, and any battalion reinforcing the direct support battalion. Field artillery units with missions of general support are omitted from the *organization for combat* paragraph, because those units do not normally give first priority calls for fire to the brigade.

The last mandatory portion of the fire support plan is the fire support coordination measures paragraph. Just as paragraph three has coordinating measures in the last paragraph, the fire support plan also has coordinating measures covering additional fire support

coordination measures, fire support succession of command, and rehearsal instructions.

The most critical contribution the company FSO makes is the fire support execution matrix. The matrix is the fire support plan in table form. Just as a maneuver execution matrix synchronizes the actions of a unit, the fire support matrix synchronizes the fire support assets available to the combined arms commander. The matrix contains three parts: *labeling*, *body*, and *specialized or contingency information*.

The fire support matrix is labeled across the top with the same phases that are on the maneuver matrix. A *notes* column, legend, or checklist may be added to clarify information that falls into the matrix data. The body contains, among other information, field artillery and mortar priorities, on-order priorities, priority targets and FPFs, triggers for firing targets, back-up initiators for targets, CAS sorties, locations of combat observation and lasing teams (COLTs), and artillery delivered scatterable mines. Other specialized or contingency items of information that should be included are actions on the loss of the company FSO, radio nets, and a legend explaining the information in the body of the matrix.

With the fire support matrix, the FSO should include a target overlay, a field artillery and mortar range fan, and a series of trigger cards for each target that the company is responsible for initiating.

The range fan graphically represents the firing limitations of the company and battalion mortars. Using the range fan, the FSO and the commander can best decide how to engage a target, and with which assets.

The trigger cards can be three-by-five index cards, each with an enemy action that triggers the target to be fired, the radio frequency to use in calling in the target, and the redundant (backup) executor of the target if the primary executor was not able. Trigger cards can be as elaborate as the maneuver, fire support, and intelligence battlefield operating systems in a synchronization matrix. Trigger cards are effective

reminders of what to do when the company continues operations for several days and suffers from reduced effectiveness due to loss of sleep. Cards passed out during rehearsals can reinforce the fire support plan and identify any remaining gaps.

Before the maneuver and fire support plan rehearsals, the commander and the company FSO must decide how fires will be cleared within the company during the battle. The clearance of fires is the process of approving or obtaining approval for attacking targets with indirect fires, both inside and outside the boundaries of the unit for which the fires are provided.

The clearance of fires must consist of a verbal response or an automated response before the mission is fired by mortars or field artillery. In recent years, silence on the firing net has implied consent, but observers at the JRTC have observed that a positive method of control is required to avoid the possibility of friendly casualties.

At the company level, the solution for clearing fires is to develop and disseminate the fire plan through an integrated maneuver and fire support rehearsal. The company FSO calls in all targets that he or the observers see, whether they are in the company sector or not. The battalion FSO is the first formal clearer of fires for a battalion or task force.

The employment of the company FSOs on the battlefield must be jointly determined by the battalion commander and the battalion FSO, on the basis of the tactical plan. The company FSO may be positioned with the company commander, with the FIST vehicle, or on some terrain from which the FSO can best control fires for the company commander.

One advantage of having the FSO positioned with the commander is the response time for fires. If the FSO is with the commander, the fire support NCO stays with the FIST vehicle. While the NCO in charge acts as track commander, a less experienced soldier often controls calls for fire from the company to the battalion. A commander's reluctance to let the FSO position

himself to best control fires arises from unfamiliarity with the FSO and his fire support abilities.

The employment of the platoon forward observer (FO) is the responsibility of the company FSO. A good working relationship with the fire support team normally relieves anxiety. The platoon FOs may call for fire themselves (*decentralized*), call for fire on a specified net to a predesignated firing unit (*predesignated*), go through the company FSO with each call for fire (*centralized*), or use a combination of all three. The control of forward observers is based on their tactical competence and experience. Placing additional personnel on the communications net to approve fires improves control but sacrifices speed.

During the battle, the FSO is responsible for monitoring the company command net, the battalion mortar direction net, the company mortar net, and the field artillery direction net. Depending on the FSO's employment option, he may have to delegate the responsibility for monitoring specific nets to members of his fire support team.

The company command net, however, must always be monitored by the FSO if he is separated from the company commander. The FSO stays abreast of developments on the battlefield and anticipates changes in the tactical situation to execute the fire support matrix. Finally, the FSO must train to assume command of the maneuver company for short periods in case the commander is wounded.

Throughout mission planning, preparation, and execution, the FSO is an integral part of the company. If his skills and the capabilities he represents are properly used, his contribution of flexible, responsive fire support makes him an indispensable element of the combined arms team.

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